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Exploring Adult Learners' Knowledge Construction of Social Foundations Content: One Higher Education Context

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores adult learners' knowledge construction of social foundations content within a Master of Adult Education program, broadening the understanding of the tenets of constructivist learning.

Keywords: adult learning, higher education, social foundations, constructivist learning

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore adult learners' knowledge construction of social foundations of adult education content areas in a Master of Adult Education program. This study contributes to the body of literature on adult learning and processing of social theories and issues within formal education in a compressed time frame (1-2 year master's degree program).

Context

Social foundations of adult education content include topics such as microaggressions, culture, privilege, power, feminism, social capital, and critical theory. These topics are important for adult educators and students to explore yet often are challenging topics to facilitate and gauge students' knowledge construction (Adams & Bell, 2016; Brookfield, 2013; Marcuse, 1965). Within higher education settings, gauging student knowledge construction of social foundations content is critical in order for the adult educator to effectively facilitate learning on individual and group levels. This paper will discuss findings identified in a qualitative study based in the United States that explored adult learners' processing of social foundations of adult education content.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study was grounded in social constructivism (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Simon, 2000). Prior conceptions and knowledge structures are major factors influencing learning. Teaching for active construction of new knowledge is a process of helping students mobilize their prior understanding and reorganize this understanding in light of current experience. Learners are challenged by the new experiences that require them to rethink and challenge their understanding of social issues affecting adult education (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). In a constructivist approach, learning is an unpredictable process because knowledge is constantly altered through new insights as students individually experience the topics and discussion with peers. The three tenets of a constructivist learning process are: cognitive display by summing up new knowledge and skills and thinking about future use; affective display by stating what is challenging or affirming; and metacognitive display by diagnosing the difference between former understanding and new understanding which brings action for change (Simons, 2000). Literature focusing on resistance (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994; Brookfield, 2015), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005), and cognitive dissonance in learning

(Festinger, 1957; van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009) also informed the conceptual framework for this study.

Current Research

Current research offers much in practical application of promoting social justice (Goodman, 2011), but the journey of adult learners through social foundations content deserves an in-depth discussion, particularly because many higher education programs have a student learning outcome related to social issues and social justice education. Therefore, this study contributes to our understanding of how one adult education program's students process social foundations content displayed in in-class and final program reflections as well as course assignments. This study may inform other programs' processes for program evaluation of student learning as well as best practices.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research design, appropriate to identify emergent themes and congruent with our overarching research question: How do adult learners process social foundations of adult education content throughout a compressed adult education master's program? We aimed to capture how students cognitively process content through in-class reflections and the analysis of artifacts and the summative evaluation at the end of the master's program. By following students' cognitive, affective, and metacognitive processing, a deeper understanding of students' learning was gained (Simons, 2000). In addition, insight into program effectiveness in achieving a final student learning outcome (understanding social issues impacting adult education) was gathered.

Modes of data collection for this study included collecting and analyzing students' written work such as microaggressions essays, cultural stories, and final projects over a two-year period. Instructor observation notes and debrief sessions over a two-year period were analyzed for themes. Critical incident questionnaires (CIQ) (Brookfield, 1995) as students moved through the content in the social foundations course provided additional data. Concept mapping data (Novak, 2010) was utilized in order to synthesize, organize, and summarize findings. Additional analysis included examining final program learning outcome reflection essays. Qualitative document analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) focused on the three tenets of constructivist learning: cognitive, affective, and metacognition.

Findings

Adult learner master's degree students processed social foundations of adult education content through: a) tension within the learning process, b) the impact of tension on social knowledge construction, and c) diverse ways of resolving tension.

Tension Within the Learning Process

The data suggests that social construction of knowledge is created through the interaction of the Dominating and the Silenced, which initially puts adult learners into two groups. When describing what was difficult during one of the class, meetings students stated the following:

“...I was interrupted several times and not really listened to.”

“Dominant people can drown out others' thoughts/contributions.”

“I have been annoyed at some of the obvious rationalizing and refusal to even look at some theory.”

“I felt engaged the entire time, but ranting against the material gets a little old.”

Comments suggest that the grouping of the Dominating and the Silenced may be more visible to the Silenced and less so to the Dominating. Final course evaluations suggest that many students end the initial social foundations of adult education course within the master’s program feeling distanced at the completion.

The Impact of Tension on Social Knowledge Construction

The Dominating and the Silenced transform the tension to that which is present between the Engaged and the Distant with content and activities. Those who are engaged seemed to be juxtaposed to those feeling “it is not about me and stories are a waste of time”. The tension dismissed other ways of knowing and topics, which some students viewed as “toxic”. This dismissal primarily was focused on feminist pedagogy, power, and privilege with the Dominating and the Silenced pushing at each other. Adult learners stated:

“A lot of students seem to speak to be heard and just talk in circles about issues we keep revisiting.”

“I felt that looking at power and culture from other points of view and how others perceive things and why has been enlightening.”

“Some people seem to get emotionally charged and feel the ‘need’ to openly express their view. This is frustrating to me. Expressing views is important but some people do it more than others.”

“I am surprised by how many of the white males become defensive when talking about white power and privilege.”

“Why does this class only look through the oppressed lens rather than all lenses that people live?”

These comments depict the swirling myriad of emotions around the content. Learners’ attitudes and previous knowledge were part of the tension and frustration within the course. Within the learning process, some learners were being exposed to information contrary to what they believed while others’ prior experiences were being confirmed.

Diverse Ways of Resolving Tension

Individual students resolved the tension in diverse ways as demonstrated in final course and student learning outcome documents at the end of the master’s degree program. The student learning outcome final reflection paper themes included connections between prior knowledge and new information as well as plans to change behavior. Statements from final reflections included:

“Before taking this program I was aware of the presence of micro-aggressions, but I didn’t have the vocabulary or an understanding of the long-term impacts of micro-aggressions on a person’s education and development.”

“I was able to understand my own heritage as well, and how my ancestors were forced to assimilate to American society. It was eye opening to explore the meaning behind microaggressions and what we can do as instructors to develop strategies to solve these issues.”

“I have had an eye-opening experience by confronting my own upbringing and experiences and biases. This was something that I have never done in such an in-depth manner and I found it to be one of the most uncomfortable experiences in this program. By the same token, it was one of the most impactful and has changed how I look at others in my personal and professional life.”

“I was surprised I had never heard of Freire and Horton before. Why hadn’t I heard of these topics?”

The students who did go deeper into content described comfortableness with the “gray” as well as processing the connections between prior knowledge and new insights. A minority of students articulated plans to change behavior, for example:

“Heightened awareness makes me a more conscientious member of society and inspires me to seek opportunity to support education for socio-economically underprivileged members of my community.”

“I will volunteer. I want to go teach ESL classes and volunteer and develop an open communication about culture.”

However, most of the student learning reflections demonstrated only a superficial connection to theory with no connection or only surface connections to material as demonstrated in the following comments:

The paragraph context was focused on barriers to education: “Financial challenges and life issues can be a complication for adult learners. Prior to the masters, I did not fully appreciate these challenges.”

“My analysis of social issues affecting education is that it is really focused on motivation in the workplace.”

“The prevention of rejection is imperative to the success of the student... The educator may not always intend to demean a fraction of her/his class, but in some situations the behavior is deliberate.”

These findings suggest that some students process the material at a deeper level while others still seem to be resistant to social issues effecting education. The responses that indicate continued

resistance do not include any of the topics discussed in the social foundations course nor do they mention the course. Instead, they revert back to material from previous courses. For instance, many return to the motivation of the learner while others may discuss the barriers to education such as time, access, financial, and work/family life. The obvious omission from these reflections is any topic related to the social foundations of adult education.

Discussion

These findings demonstrate how learners perceive they socially interact with others, hear or silence multiple points of view, and construct their perspectives within a social constructivist framework. The findings expand upon our understanding of constructivist learning particularly within the context of a social foundations focus area. The study provided an opportunity for a deeper analysis of how students cognitively and affectively process the content. While learning is an individual process, the participation in the social discussion with peers and other activities influence the student's meaning making. The discussion of the findings is grounded in the cognitive, affective, and metacognitive development of students concerning social issues affecting adult education.

In the *cognitive domain*, individual papers documented most of the students processed the content and compared it to previous learning and social influences in their lives. Many expressed surprise at these ideas and wondered why they had not heard of them before now.

In the *affective domain*, although some learners found validation in the content and some discussions, others were frustrated and reacted negatively to the content. The resulting emotional reactions expressed in the classroom caused frustration, marginalization, and in some cases perpetuated the views held by the dominant group as "right" with statements such as: "How could this be? It isn't true. It's exaggerated." Students in class have openly expressed frustration with the inability of many of their white male classmates to understand or "see" the information as valid.

In the *metacognitive domain*, we found that some of the students' portfolio reflection papers demonstrated the ability to evaluate their learning and reflect on the learning experience. Some were able to articulate that they would be changing their actions in the future while others only articulated superficial connections.

The analysis of our findings is grounded in Simon's (2000) social constructivist scheme of cognitive, affective, and metacognitive adult development and suggest some students' later reflections on social foundations content and experiences transition them from resistance to a more open stance of viewing their power and privilege; however, some students remain dismissive of concepts of power and privilege and committed to their prior knowledge and beliefs. The frustration between the two groups of the Dominating and the Silenced may be visible to the Silenced and less so to the Dominating.

Conclusions and Implications

This study contributes to our understanding of how one adult education program's individual students process social foundations content. These findings may facilitate the development of a model to teach social foundations content in order to inform other programs that aim to facilitate and support deep knowledge construction. In addition, this study suggests points of consideration for program evaluation of student learning as well as best practices as adult educators strive to understand learners' experiences. For example, the formation of the Dominating and the Silenced within formal courses deserves more in-depth examination. A

closer look at how students receive information and construct knowledge within the affective domain may give adult educators additional insights about how to support students as they process social foundations content.

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